

## **Chapter 12: The Holy Spirit in the Sacrifice of Christ (Heb.9:13 -14)**

*'For if the sprinkling of defiled persons, with the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Therefore he is the Mediator of a New Covenant'. (Heb.9:13-14)*

These two verses tell us that Christ's shedding of his blood expresses the perfect personal offering He made under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. It is the blood of the new covenant. And while the sacrifices of the old covenant offered ritual purification, they could not bring about an authentic covenant with God because they were incapable of having any influence on a person's conscience.

But, Christ offered himself without blemish under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. His sacrifice was an offering of himself, in his whole human nature, not an offering of some gift. The High priest, was neither capable nor worthy to offer himself, since he was not without blemish as victims of sacrifice were supposed to be. *'If his offering is to be a burnt offering from the herd, he must offer an unblemished male...'. (Lev.1:3)*

Christ was always positive about accepting the will of his Father. All during his life he took the initiative to do the will of the Father; He accepted the challenges and difficulties involved in living his life and resolutely took the road to Jerusalem when that time came. *'Now it happened as the time drew near for him to be taken up he resolutely turned his face to Jerusalem and sent messengers ahead of him'. (Luke 9:51)* He was handed over and arrested in Gethsemane and he did not allow Peter to defend him.

He is the true and worthy high priest because he had the religious and moral integrity to be trustworthy. He is a capable high priest because he is full of the power of the Holy Spirit, who was active in his conception, baptism and ministry according to the gospels. And according to the letter to the Hebrews the Paschal Mystery of Christ was a mystery brought about by the Holy Spirit.

While the author does not use the title Holy /spirit, in Heb. 9:14, he uses the words 'eternal spirit' which is unique in the bible as a way of designating the Holy Spirit. As God alone is eternal, the eternal spirit is the spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. The author uses the word 'eternal' as he wants to emphasise the unique value of Christ's offering which gives us the possibility of obtaining an 'eternal redemption'. Only the power of the eternal Spirit could communicate to Christ the necessary impulse to make such an offering capable of establishing a truly new and eternal Covenant. This teaching is found in the prayer before Communion in the Mass; *'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, by the will of the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit gave life to the world...'*

St John Chrysostom suggests that the author of Hebrew wanted to show that in the sacrifice of New Covenant, "The Holy Spirit has taken the place of the fire in the sacrifices of the old covenant. What was the function of the fire in the burnt sacrifices of the Old Covenant? The function of the fire in the Old Covenant sacrifices was to change the victim into smoke which went up to heaven; God smelt and liked the scent. The following is an example *'Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and choosing from all the clean animals, all the clean birds he presented burnt offerings on the altar. The Lord smelt the pleasant smell of and said to himself: 'Never again, will I curse the earth because of human beings; because their heart contrives evil from their infancy. Never again, will I strike every living thing as I have done'.* (Gen 8:20-21).

Here, we are not talking of ordinary fire. The book of Leviticus tells us that the sacrificial worship of the people of God was offered by means of a fire that came from God and only that fire could make the offering smoke sweet-smelling. At the inauguration of the priestly worship we are told: *'fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering upon the altar'.* (Lev. 9:24)

Vanhoye uses a text from John's gospel to confirm that meaning; *'No one has ever gone up to heaven except the Son of Man who came down from heaven.* (John 3:13)

The book of Leviticus says: *'This is the regulation for burnt offerings; the burnt offering shall stay on the altar all night until morning and the fire is to be kept burning on it, it shall not go out'.* (Lev. 6:2)

At the dedication of Solomon's Temple we read; *'When Solomon had finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offerings and the sacrifices.'*(2Chr.7:1)

This fire was to be preserved and never allowed to go out. *'The fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it, it shall not go out'*. (Lev.6:12). It was always the same fire that originally came down from heaven that was used for sacrificial offerings.

As the word sacrifice means, to make sacred, only God can make an offering sacred and our only role in a sacrifice, is to present an offering to Him, even a fire, lit by humans, was ineffectual. The fire of Temple sacrifices was fire that came down from heaven, from God, and **was understood in a material way** like lightening from the clouds. This understanding of the fire made their understanding of the sacrifice imperfect. God alone can make something sacred by placing it in his divine holiness which is *"a devouring fire"*. (Dt. 24 & 9:3)

The author of Hebrews overcomes this misunderstanding; by reflecting on the Paschal Mystery he came to the true meaning of the symbol of fire. The fire of Christ's sacrifice is the spirit of God, the sanctifier, who makes holy. The Holy Spirit is alone capable of bringing about a true transformation of an offering, by bringing the offering into God's holiness. No material power, not even fire, is capable of making an offering acceptable to God because we are dealing not with a space journey to but with a journey to inner transformation of the heart. This inner transformation of the heart is needed by humans to come close to God. And only the Holy Spirit makes such a transformation possible and effective.

The sacrifice of Christ did not happen by means of a fire burning on the altar in the Temple but by means of the Holy Spirit who filled the heart of Jesus with an extraordinarily strong love. Because Jesus was empowered by the strength of the Holy Spirit he had the mental and spiritual impulse of faithfulness, which changed his death by condemnation into a perfect offering of himself to God for the benefit of us all. This brought Christ's human nature from the earthly level, from the level of flesh and blood, in which he lived in virtue of his Incarnation, to the level of union with God in glory.

Jesus passed from this world to the Father by a transformation, a sanctification, or as the fourth gospel puts it: *'And for their sake I consecrate myself so that they too may be consecrated in truth'*. (John 17:19). We could translate this as "I sacrifice myself". This shows that to sacrifice and to sanctify mean the same thing. When we sacrifice we are being made holy by the Holy Spirit pouring love into our hearts.

If God requests an offering from us it is not to enrich himself for he has no need of our offerings; he makes the request in order to communicate his holiness to us so as to transform and change us by filling us with the Spirit of his love. Relying on our own strength we are not capable of offering a true sacrifice. We can only ask the Lord to transform it by the power of the Holy Spirit.

How do we get the strength to be capable of offering a true sacrifice? We get it just as Jesus did. *'In the days of his flesh, he offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence'*. (Heb. 5:7)

In his Incarnation Jesus had assumed our weak, fragile mortal human nature. Facing a cruel death he found himself in a very anxious situation. But in this condition, after praying intensely he received in his human nature a new fullness of the Holy Spirit who gave him the strength to offer himself with perfect love.

To obtain the Holy Spirit who can transform our offerings it is crucial that we follow the example of Christ and pray with intensity to obtain the transforming action of the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of love. Jesus through intense prayer inhaled the Holy Spirit who entered the blood of Jesus and gave him this strength of love.

Vanhoye uses a text from the fourth gospel which is a similar teaching; it says that from the pierced side of Jesus, *"there came our blood and water"*. (John 19:34) Vanhoye says that this demonstrates that by means of the passion, the water of the Spirit was united to the blood of Christ. *On the last day, the great day of festival; Jesus stood and cried out: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me! Let anyone who believes in me come and drink! As scripture says, "from his heart shall flow streams of living water"'. He was speaking of the Spirit which*

*those who believed in him were to receive; for there was no Spirit as yet because Jesus had not yet been glorified. (John 7:37-39)*

The author of Hebrews says, *“the blood of Christ... shall purify your conscience from dead works”* (Heb. 9:14) because it is *permeated* by the Holy Spirit through intense prayer. The blood of Christ will also open for us the water of the Spirit, which will both purify us from sin and give us the strength to serve God.

Just as we breathe air to oxygenate the blood and give life energy to all parts of the body we can say that through his intense prayer during his passion Jesus breathed in the Holy Spirit in a way that the Holy Spirit entered into his very being giving him the strength and power of love which pushed him to offer his own life as a gift of perfect love. He is our model.

Heb. 9:14 says; *‘the blood of Christ... shall purify your conscience from dead works’*. This is because his blood is permeated by the Holy Spirit through intense prayer. The Holy Spirit also opens us to the water of the Holy Spirit which has the double effect of purifying us and strengthening us to serve God perfectly.

The author of Hebrews says ‘Christ is the Mediator of the new covenant; he has removed the obstacles and assured our union with God and unity among ourselves. Just as we breathe air to oxygenate our blood and obtain the energy to live so too we can say that in a similar way we can say that Christ, through his passion by means of his intense prayer, has breathed the Holy Spirit who has entered him and empowered him to offer his own life as a gift of perfect love.

We thank God for this extraordinary gift and model given for us. Let us try to follow the example of Christ and breathe the Holy Spirit with intense prayer and become an acceptable offering to God.